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ABSTRACT

The study examines the relationship between success upon leaving an alternative school program and immediate measures of program effect. The strength of the relationship was used to determine the degree to which the program effected its long term goals of preparing students for future academic or vocational success. Student success was defined as behavior reflecting adequate academic skills and attitudes toward education. It was measured by ranking three outcomes in descending order: return to formal education; securing employment or a general educational development (GED) diploma; not returning to school, not working, or not pursuing the GED. The immediate measures of program effect were reading achievement, mathematics achievement, absenteeism rate, disciplinary referral rate, change in absenteeism of disciplinary referral rates, and attitude toward school. Students assessed were between the ages of 13 and 20 who had participated in an alternative school program stressing small group instruction and vocational/prevocational training sponsored by five Louisiana school systems. The regression model accounted for 25 percent of the variance in student outcomes. Age, mathematics achievement, and absenteeism rate were the only variables which had a probability level of less than .05. The relationship was positive for mathematics achievemert and negative for age and absenteeism. (Author/DWH)

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BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES OF AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

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BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES OF AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between success upon leaving an alternative school program and immediate measures of program effect. Student success was defined as behavior reflecting adequate academic skills and attitudes toward education and was measured by ranking three outcomes in descending order: return to formal education; securing employment or a GED; not returning to school, not working, or not pursuing the GED. The immediate measures of program effect were reading achievement, mathematics achievement, absenteeism rate, disciplinary referral rate, change in absenteeism, change in disciplinary referral rate, and attitude toward school. Age was also considered in the regression. The students were 169 youths between the ages of 13 and 20 who had participated in an alternative school program stressing small group instruction and vocational/prevocational training sponsored by five Louisiana school systems.

The regression model accounted for 25 percent of the variance in student outcomes. Of the variables considered, only age, mathematics achievement, and absenteeism rate had a probability level of less than .05. The relationship was positive for mathematics achievement and negative for age and absenteeism.

INTRODUCTION

The general public school retention rates in Louisiana have improved through the years, but they have leveled off in the last few years (Comfort and Falk, 1979).

A school dropout is defined as a pupil who leaves a school, for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school (Titone, 1982, p. 1).

According to Comfort and Falk one-third of all the public school children in Louisiana will not graduate from high school if the trend continues. These same children, according to Comfort and Falk, will have to compete in and be absorbed by a labor market that requires rising levels of skills for job placement.

This predicament is not unique to Louisiana. Generally speaking, our public schools across the nation are experiencing a higher dropout rate than they did in the 1960's and early 1970's. One-third of the nation's public school children leave school; and out of that number, 53 percent are male, 45 percent quit at age 16, nine-tenths are retained once, and six-tenths are retained at least twice (Titone, 1982). In the late 1970's, school administrators and school boards across the nation registered their alarm when they raised keeping students in school to the "critical issue" category in the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) "Critical Issues Survey." The AASA Critical Issues Report of 1979, edited by Shirley B. Neill and produced by the Education News Service, lists the following developments that combine to make dropping out a critical issue: more students are deliberately playing truant, declining enrollment portends cuts in alternative programs and the support personnel that encourage regular school attendance, and the dropout rate has risen again after experiencing its lowest level in our nation's history in 1960s and the early 1970s.

According to the Report, these students are put at a lifelong disadvantage in the labor market when they are compared with the youths who either stayed in school or were continuously employed after dropping out. The latter group of students enjoys greater economic and job experience successes. As evidence, school administrators ranked permanent intellectual and/or vocational damage to student dropouts as the most negative result of poor school attendance. Titone (1982) notes that aside from the loss in skilled manpower and in foregone

Federal and State government revenue, there is a loss in the lifetime personal income for dropouts.

He further explains that the professional educator has little, if any, control over non-school variables such as family economics and background, ethnic grouping, pregnancy, early marriage, and full-time employment. Contrarily, there are certain variables in the school that contribute to the student's departure from school. These include the school environment, student reading academic deficiencies, and the placement of students in academic classes in which failures outnumber successes.

Disruptive student behavior at school is quite often a counteraction to the student's perceived failure in the student role (Mann and Gold, 1981). According to these researchers, disruptive behavior is a defensive response to the threat to the adolescent's self-esteem. Furthermore, disrupting school serves several purposes:

- It acts as a counterattack on the threatening institution.
- It elicits the admiration of the peer audience at school.
- It declares rebellion against the standards of success set by the schools.

Although academic failure is a primary precursor to both disruptive school behavior and dropping out, only 32 percent of the students who drop out are educationally handicapped. Titone (1982) reports that "Although he tends to score lower than his in-school counterpart, a nationwide study, conducted by the United States Department of Labor, showed that 70 percent of the dropouts surveyed had registered IQ scores above 90" (p.4).

Correspondingly, 66 percent of the student dropouts are capable students, and only 20 percent are involuntary dropouts or students who have been forced out of school by school officials. In consideration of these facts, Titone offers three possible solutions: reading, early identification, and an alternative achievement program. Limar and Edmonston (1976) offer this definition of alternative education:

> The term "Alternative Education" is not easily defined. The diverse makeup of the various programs now in operation makes formulating a one or two-sentence definition next to impossible. A definition can be approached, however, by stating that intrinsic to the alternative concept is the idea that each student has a potential for learning that is unique to that individual and that alternatives complement this ideal by providing for the differences with a wide

> variety of curriculum choices or options. It is important to remember that these options must be made available if the program is to be considered a true alternative. Along with this is the belief that the diverse makeup of alternative education does not prevent all programs from sharing in the idea that students and parents are being provided with a choice in education. (p.2)

Limar and Edmonston go on to describe a variety of seven programs that may be considered as alternatives to conventional education: (1) private schools; (2) schools without walls; (3) street academies, dropout centers, and pregnancy centers; (4) magnet schools and learning centers; (5) ethnic schools and multicultural schools; (6) schools-within-a-schools; and (7) "in-school" alternatives to deal with disruptive students. For the most part, alternative education programs for students at risk of becoming dropouts on account of academic failure and disruptive school behavior, or both, incorporate such features as self-paced individualized or small group instruction in the basic skills of reading and math, inculcate a positive philosophy, and focus on student self-esteem and motivation (D.C. Public Schools, 1980). In addition, some alternative education programs include the prevocational or vocational education curriculum (Beach and Halverson, 1981).

In AASA (1979) Shirley Neill observes that the relationship between school influences, especially curriculum, and attendance is poorly researched and that the amount of hard research data on the effectiveness of the alternative schools is limited because the phenomenon of alternative programs is barely more than a decade old. In 1981 the National Diffusion Network included only 10 alternative programs and reported little hard data about the effectiveness of these (Education Programs That Work, 1981). Notwithstanding, Neill cites a study conducted by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) that concludes with a "success formula." This formula consists of careful planning, community input, and flexibility. The study found that the participants in the alternative education program performed on standardized tests at least as well as their counterparts in the conventional settings and usually better. And without exception, the attendance rates of the alternative education students surpassed those of students in regular schools.

Titone (1982), Mann and Gold (1981), and Neil (1979) each agree that the dedication of the teacher is central to planning, individualized or self-paced instruction, and flexibility. It is the social support from warm, nurturant, and accepting teachers that facilitates the activities of an alternative pro-

gram. Students learn more from people they like and have better attendance when they perceive their teachers as being empathic, fair, and respectful (AASA, 1979). And finally, the involvement of students and their families in decision making is also important in alternative education programs (Beech and Halverson, 1981).

Description of the Program

The program was established and funded by the Louisiana legislature in 1981 to provide an alternative educational setting for junior high school or older students who were at risk of leaving school without graduating. Each of the five school systems participating in the Consortium developed its own structure. The structure of all local projects included a class size of no more than 15 students for each teacher and a mixture of basic skills and vocational training. Local resources varied in providing the vocational training, which ranged from extensive to limited. Students were referred for participation in the Consortium by their regular classroom teachers and principals on the basis of school failure, absenteeism and disciplinary problems, and the judgment that the student would not remain in school without some intervention. Students were also required to be 13 years of age or older. Participation was voluntary and had to be agreed to by the student's parents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between immediate and long-term program outcomes among students participating in the Acadiana Consortium. Specifically, the study examined the relation between the student's status after discontinuing participation in the program and variables selected to represent the program's immediate effect. The strength of the relationship was used as a measure of the degree to which the program effected its long-term goals of preparing students for future success in school or adult life.

Description of the Study

Design

The data for this study were taken from the second year of the Acadiana Consortium's operation, 1982-83, and were collected as a part of the evaluation. The dependent variable, student outcome, was created by weighting status categories reported for noncontinuing students. A weight of 1 was assigned to the reported status categories depending upon whether they represented either or both of two program goals: improved performance and improved attitudes toward school. The three outcome values were assigned as shown in the schema below.

	Performance	Attitude	Total Weight
Return to school or vocational/ technical training	1	1	2
Employed or pursuing/gained GED diploma	1	0	1
Not in school, not working, not pursing GED	0	0	0

The independent variables included age as of December 1981 (since age could be expected to influence a student's leaving school or gaining employment and the GED regardless of the program's influence) and measures of the program's effects upon performance and attitudes. The measure selected for attitude toward school was the student's score on the School Affiliation scale of the Self Observation Scale (SOS). The other independent variables selected as measures of performance were reading achievement, mathematics achievement, average number of absences during the last year in the Consortium, the change in average number of absences between the last year in the Consortium and the year preceding participation, the average number of disciplinary referrals during the last year of participation in the Consortium, and the change in the average number of disciplinary referrals from the year prior to participation to the last year of participation. The evaluation of the program (Griffin, 1984) had found that students improved in reading and mathematics performance and in absenteeism and discipline during participation. These outcomes appeared logical predictors; i.e., the future success of the students could be expected to depend on their being functionally literate, punctual, and free of disciplinary problems.

Instrumentation

The SOS is a nationally normed measure of student attitudes toward self and school that includes a subscale for School Affiliation. This scale measures how students view the experiences associated with going to school. Students with high scores view school as a positive influence in their lives. They enjoy school and the activities related to school. Students with low scores view school as an unhappy place to be. They do not enjoy most school-related activities and are negative about the importance of school in their lives.

Reading achievement was measured by the PAIR (Performance Assessment in Reading) and the ASC (Assessment of Skills in Computation). Both tests are measures of functional competency designed for junior high school and high school students. Scores are reported as the percent of items answered correctly. The PAIR, ASC, and SOS were administered by the Consortium teachers under the supervision of the evaluators.

Disciplinary and absenteeism rates were reported for students by the Consortium teachers. They were averaged across the number of grading periods reported for each student to provide an average per six weeks grading period. This gave a standard value for students regardless of whether data were available for the same number of grading periods.

Sample

The sample consisted of all noncontinuing students for whom complete data were available, a total of 169 students. This group excluded students who participated in the program for only a short period of time and upon whom participation could be expected to have had little effect.

Data Analysis

All data had been collected as a part of the Acadiana Consortium's regular evaluation. The data were analyzed using the SAS (Statistical Analysis System) general linear models procedure for multiple linear regression. The probability level for statistical significance was set at .05.

RESULTS

Descriptive and Comparative Data

The values for the variables in the study are shown on Table 1. Of the 169 students, 99 (58.6%) had returned to school, 34 (20.1%) were working or pursuing the GED, and 36 (21.3%) were neither in school nor working. About half of the students (53.8%) were 15 or 16 years of age. A total of 62 (38.8%) were younger than 15, and 12 (7.5%) were older than 16.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-CONTINUING STUDENTS (N=169)

	Number Students	Percent Students
Outcome after leaving Program		
Returned to school setting	99	58.6
GED or work	34	20.1
Not in school, working or GED	36	21.3
Age Upon Leaving Program		
13-14	62	38.8
15-16	86	53.8
17-20	12	7.5
Not Known	9	-

	Number Students	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Reading (PAIR)	169	61.95	19.70
Mathematics (ASC)	169	45.37	15.18
Absences - Consortium	169	2.43	2.20
Absences - Change	169	-1.51	3.60
Disciplinary - Consortium	169	0.25	0.48
Disciplinary - Change	169	-0.65	1.43
Affiliation for School (SOS)	153	48.63	11.64

The average percent score in reading on the PAIR was 61.95; two-thirds of the students scored between 42.25 and 81.65. In mathematics, the average percent score on the ASC was 45.37, with a standard deviation of 15.18.

The data on absenteeism showed that the noncontinuing students had been absent an average of 2.43 days each grading period during their final year in the Consortium. This was an average of 1.51 days fewer absences per grading period than had been reported for the year preceding entry into the program. The average number of disciplinary referrals for each grading period had also declined. Students had an average of 0.25 referrals per grading period in their last year of the Consortium, a decline of 0.65 from their performance prior to participation in the program.

The SOS average score on Affiliation for School was 48.63, with a standard deviation of 11.64.

Relationship Between Outcome and Other Variables

Table 2 presents the regression analysis of the variables whose effects upon student outcome were tested. The total model had a probability of .0001 and accounted for 25 percent of the variance among student outcomes (R-Square= 0.2464). Of the variables examined, only three had a probability of less than .05. These were mathematics score (PR=.0123), absenteeism in Consortium (PR=.0004), and age (PR=.0028). As the statistic shows, mathematics score was positively associated with student outcome, and both age and absenteeism rate had a negative relationship with the independent variable.

TABLE 2. RELATIONSHIP OF FACTORS TO STATUS AFTER LEAVING PROGRAM

Source	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F value	PR> F	R-Square
Model	8	23.230	2.904	5.48	0.0001*	0.2464
Error	134	71.050	0.530			
Corrected Total	142	94.280				

Source	Sum of Squares	F value	PR> F	T for HO: Parameter=0
Math (ASC)	3.412	6.44	0.0123*	2.54
Reading (PAIR)	0.292	0.55	0.4591	0.74
Absence, Post	7.108	13.41	0.0004*	- 3.66
Discipline, Post	0.002	0.00	0.9522	- 0.06
Absence, Change	0.194	0.37	0.5467	- 0.60
Discipline, Change	0.854	1.61	0.2065	1.27
Age	4.922	9.28	0.0028*	- 3.05
School Affiliation (SOS)	0.012	0.02	0.8798	0.15

*PR < .05

DISCUSSION

The negative relationship between age and outcome was expected. Younger students are more likely to return to the regular classroom following participation in an alternative education program such as the Consortium. Under a certain age students cannot leave school or secure employment. However, this does not argue against the Consortium's effects. The program evaluation had found that the regular classroom teachers reported that the majority of these returning students were performing as well as, or better than, other students, and it should be remembered that school failure was a requirement for enrollment in the Consortium.

As expected, mathematics achievement was positively related to student outcome as a measure of academic capability. Students with higher achievement performance were expected to be more likely to return to school, attempt the GED, or secure work. However, reading achievement was not significantly associated with outcome. There is no immediate explanation for this discrepancy.

The same holds true for the behavioral variables. Students with lower rates of absenteeism were more successful upon leaving the Consortium, but the effect for the incidence of disciplinary referrals is not statistically significant.

The total model accounts for a large enough amount of variance to warrant further exploration but is not, in the judgment of the authors, strong enough to explain a practically meaningful amount of difference. The model is also dissatisfying in that half of the variables have the expected effect in the expected direction. Earlier evaluations have found that the Acadiana Consortium is effective in achieving its immediate objectives. Students improve their performance in reading and mathematics, attend class more regularly, and have fewer disciplinary problems during participation in the program. These same evaluations also found that the students were very different from one another. Anecdotal data had shown that the Consortium served students from varied backgrounds, including those students from middle class and poverty backgrounds; those with above average ability as well as those with a history of learning difficulties. It is possible that a quantitative model is inappropriate for weighing the effect of academic intervention with such a cross-section of pupils, and that a case study approach is better suited to depict the program's ultimate results.

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